REVIEWS

David A. Davis. *World War I and Southern Modernism*. UP of Mississippi, 2018, 234 pages.

In his last book, *World War I and Southern Modernism,* David A. Davis demonstrates how the European theatre of war in 1914-1918 informed the intellectual and cultural landscape of the South, initiating processes which ultimately culminated in the region's embrace of modernism, and its entrance into a period of social transformation and departure from literary conventions. Davis's monograph, published by the University Press of Mississippi in 2018 and winner of the Eudora Welty prize, makes a compelling argument for how the complex amalgam of novel ideas and attitudes brought forth by the war had a profound impact on the cultural, social and artistic idiom of the South. To an already existing plethora of paradoxes associated with southern culture, Davis adds another, arguing that effectively, in the South, "modernism preceded modernity" (6). In this monograph, he succeeds in showing how in the South, a society that was largely cut off due to World War I looked back at the antebellum period and the Civil War through the lenses of a romanticized narrative, found itself in a situation of cultural and historical disruption, one that yanked the region from its provincialism and separationist tendencies, and forced it to embrace progress.

This hurried evolution of the region was fuelled by a number of socio-economic factors: by the northern and southern soldiers training side by side in military camps on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, by the throngs of workers leaving the South and going north, lured by the prospect of jobs in factories struggling with labour shortages, or by new technologies in agriculture which began to substitute obsolete practices, gradually pushing the region from agrarianism to agricultural-industrial ways. Davis stresses that all these processes took place in the South too quickly for the region to find adequate ways of accommodating modernity. In his words, because of World War I, "southerners experienced the effects of modernity often before the region actually modernised: they experienced cities before they urbanized, they worked in factories before they industrialized, they used new technologies before the South had electrical or communication infrastructure, and they made contacts with populations that held more progressive ides before they liberated" (11).

Davis views the war as a catalyst which wrenched the region from the grip of nostalgia, thrusting it into modernity before its time. A number of regional dichotomies, like industry and agriculture, urbanism and ruralism, cosmopolitanism and provincialism, progressivism and conservatism, localism and globalism arose in the wake of the war, and began to preoccupy and contextualize the ambitions and fears of the region. Understandably, to conservative mind-sets, these processes were nothing other than corruptive and damaging – they were viewed as a direct threat to a southern identity which sustained white supremacy and Jim Crow. The advocates of the lost cause (Davis, as he explains, purposefully uses low capital letters for fear it might reify the term and thus reinforce the idea behind it) launched a series of attacks

at the inevitable changes. In consequence, while Europe was consumed by the theatre of World War I, the South was subject to the conflicted disruption of identity. It is the crux of Davis's argument in *World War I and Southern Modernism* that a number of southern writers were responding to the social and economic disruption by seeking new forms of artistic engagement. In his monograph, Davis identifies five central areas of modernist disruption and demonstrates how they were confronted by a number of southern authors: interstate contact, southern soldiers fighting oversees, African-American soldiers returning to the South, the fight for women's rights and rapid changes in southern agriculture. Each disruption is discussed in a separate chapter and such an organization allows Davis to show how complex and multifaceted the impact of the war was upon the region.

In the first chapter, "The Forward Glance," Davis discusses how the intensified interstate travel which accompanied World War I influenced the southern literature. With southern isolationism crumbling, the intellectual and social barriers between North and South weakened. As argued by Davis, the contact "between northerners and southerners exploded the northerners' regional stereotypes of the South and dissolved much of southerners' lost cause enmity towards Yankees" (25). Here, Davis's discussions of Faulkner's first novel, *Soldier's Pay*, as well as of selected works by F. Scott Fitzgerald and Dos Passos, shows how the interregional exchange impacted the perception of the South.

In the second chapter, Davis demonstrates how many white male southerners who served in Europe during the war came to feel deeply conflicted about their regional identity. Between America's declaration of war in 1917, and the demobilisation of the army of occupation in Germany in 1919, nearly a million southerners served in the military, accounting for almost a quarter of American military personnel—the highest demographic of all regions of the US. Raised by the sons and grandsons of Confederate veterans, surrounded by the lost cause mythology, these soldiers had difficulty identifying themselves as both American and southern. Davis shows how different southern writers dramatized this conundrum of allegiance in their works. William Alexander Percy's coping strategy was to defend and endorse traditional southern ways in his writings. Paul Green went in a different direction. His stay in France allowed him to develop a much more liberal and progressive outlook, which he expressed, among others, in his pacifist play *Johnny Johnson*. The third text discussed by Davis, Donald Davidson's poem *The Tall Man,* written three years before the publication of *I'll Take My Stand,* is more aligned with Percy's thinking and constitutes another excellent illustration of how conservative agrarianism proclaimed modernity to be the region's nemesis.

For the advocates of racial integration and critics of Jim Crow, the war seemed like an opportunity to make their case for civil rights. Having experienced relative racial equality overseas, African-American soldiers drafted into the American army felt entitled to make a claim for citizenship upon their return. In the third chapter, Davis draws a painful image of disillusionment and violence, opening this section of the book with the example of Wilbur Little, an African American soldier, who having returned to Georgia from his service in World War I, was lynched when he wore his uniform in public. Again, Davis gives three examples of African American writers who portray black southern soldiers fighting for freedom and equality after their

homecoming: Victory Daly, Walter White and Claude McKay.

The fourth chapter of the monograph is dedicated to the impact of World War I on women's rights in the South. The region's notorious Victorian-like decorum of femininity began to change during the war and immediately after its end. Davis stresses the paradox of culture which venerated the belle as a paragon of respectability, and simultaneously subjugated her completely through patriarchy, depriving her of legal as well as social subjectivity—the "praise of virtues such as devotion, humility, charity, commitment, sacrifice, loyalty, and chastity inscribed an image of the southern woman as the angel in the house, an image that became a cultural icon and a social problem" (119). The influx of early feminist ideas exposed and engaged with these paradoxes—especially, when the war and the social challenges it entailed caused profound changes in gender demographics. Understandably, in the conservative social environment, truly herculean efforts to stop the advance of gender rights were made. Here also Davis gives three examples of novels written by female authors: Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *He Sent Forth a Raven*, Ellen Glasgow' *Vein of Iron* and Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz* which succeeded in exposing the makeshift social schemes devised to curate the patriarchy and to prevent it from dissolution.

The fifth area of modernist disruption is discussed in the chapter "Mules and Machines" and concerns the region's economy. Due to the notorious labour shortages resulting from an exodus of people, the agricultural landscape of the South was fundamentally changed in the wake of the war. The traditional way of life in the region, one associated with rural agriculture, became visibly obsolete, and the dichotomy of the eponymous "mules" and "machines" from the title of the chapter came to epitomize the ambivalent suspension of the region between the past and the present. Here, Davis discusses the writings of Ellen Glasgow, W. J. Cash and William Faulkner, to show how the abrupt and violent changes in the agricultural landscape of the region in the wake of the war translated into the issues of identity.

Davis's *World War I and Southern Modernism* is a vital study for Southern Studies, providing insights into how the transatlantic war context informed southern culture at the most basic level, and how the inevitable socio-economic changes shaped both the themes and techniques of the southern literary idiom. The five areas of disruption identified by Davis serve well to illustrate the extent to which discussions of the "nation's region" (to borrow the title of Leigh Anne Duck's insightful study on American modernism and the South) cannot be divorced from the transatlantic context in the 1920s. The texts selected by Davis to illustrate this point mostly represent novels – although he does include singular discussions of other genres, ranging from poetry (Davidson), journalistic-sociological comment (Cash) to drama (Green). However, this strong focus on novels does not change an overall highly positive assessment of the monograph as a well-researched and comprehensive study of the subject. In all of his erudite discussions, Davis remains adept at demonstrating to his readers how the encroachment of modernity forced southerners to rethink the founding principles of race, gender and economy which the region held as the basis for its quotidian world.

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